

## Backwards glances at lesbian photography

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The visibility of queer art in UK cultural venues currently has a historical dimension as various exhibitions, screenings and publications mark 50 years since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. An anniversary of little consequence unless contextualised alongside the Abortion Act of the same year and the subsequent emergence of the gay liberation movement, it nonetheless highlights the conditions under which queer practices are becoming institutionalised. A more interesting dimension is the present interest in one historically significant intersection between lesbian identity with photography, which has surfaced not through major survey shows but through artist and activist-led initiatives. In exhibitions such as *On Our Backs: An Archive*, organised by artists Janina Sabaliauskaite and Jade Sweeting at The Newbridge Project in Newcastle upon Tyne earlier this year to celebrate the lesbian erotica magazine, practices that burgeoned in the 1980s and 1990s are thrown into relief at a time when queer activism, as well as queer art, is flourishing.

*Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, a volume edited by Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser and published by Pandora Press in 1991, tells us something about what was at stake in an encounter between lesbian identity and visual culture. The book brought together the work of more than 30 photographers and writers, to look at the subject of lesbian representation at a time when lesbian and gay politics was galvanised by the AIDS crisis and, in the UK, the implementation of Section 28, a law that prohibited the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality by local authorities. By no means the only book to capture the scope of lesbian cultural production that emerged in this context (e.g. *Nothing But the Girl: The Blatant Lesbian Image*, co-edited by Susie Bright and Jill Posener in 1996, is another important touchstone), *Stolen Glances* is a pertinent record of a time when photography, cultural theory and political activism coalesced. The apparently generative spaces in which lesbian photography is shared in 2017 bear witness to the forms of community that underpinned a project like *Stolen Glances* almost three decades ago. This point can surely be reversed. The visual and theoretical intervention the book makes promises to illuminate the return to these practices and debates in the present.

## Lesbian semiotics

The emphasis on visibility that has often been cited as a tenant of queer cultural practices and politics, including by some of the contributors to *Stolen Glances*, obscures the more sophisticated intervention sought by its editors. Their stated contribution was to contemporaneous debates in photo theory that distinguished the ‘representation of politics’ from the ‘politics of representation’. The distinction separates straightforward documentary practices from a more nuanced analysis of the way that representation frames and organises political subjects. The central role played by photography and other technologies of vision in this political procedure was explored throughout the 1980s by people like Victor Burgin, Roberta McGrath and Simon Watney, among others. Boffin and Fraser came into proximity with these ideas as students at the Polytechnic of Central London, though these debates developed outside of the academy too, through the network of spaces and platforms that made up the so-called ‘independent photography’ scene. This network was closely connected to centres of left political thought and action, of which lesbian and gay politics was one important manifestation, and *Stolen Glances* toured as an exhibition to a number of associated spaces, including Stills Gallery in Edinburgh and the Cambridge Darkroom. Related material also circulated in magazines such as the Birmingham-based *TEN*.<sup>8</sup> and the US *Afterimage*, published by the Visual Studies Workshop, and through galleries like Camerawork where Fraser and Sunil Gupta had launched an earlier exhibition exploring lesbian and gay perspectives in photography and theory, *Same Difference* in 1986.

The scale of the *Stolen Glances* project was, clearly, huge. It took Boffin and Fraser three years to complete, and for this they received only a small grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain. This public body was engaged in promoting photography publishing at the time, a peculiar footnote since it was simultaneously implementing policy that would contribute to the demise of many of the institutions associated with the independent photography sector. The award of public funds to a project like *Stolen Glances* signals the starkly ideological character of a moment when the Tory government put the Arts Council under increasing pressure. Under the supervision of MP Norman Tebbit, it was eventually disbanded in 1994 in favour of a disaggregated model underwritten by privately operated funds provided through the National Lottery. This is all of note given the broader context that *Stolen Glances* appeared in. The book was published just three years after Section 28 was successfully passed into law. Lesbian activism was galvanised in an attempt to repeal the legislation, including a series of infamous, if not famous, actions that included a group invading the BBC’s *Six O’Clock News*, abseiling into the House of Lords and chaining

themselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace dressed as suffragettes. This struggle was strengthened by the not so distant memory of the women's liberation movement as well as the radical lesbian factions at Greenham Common. As with those struggles, photography, film and video played an important role at a time of aggressive state censorship, something that is explored extensively in the book, both in the introduction and in dedicated essays by Deborah Bright and Anne Marie Smith, respectively.

Against this backdrop, Fraser and Boffin sought to move beyond the strategy of creating 'positive images' that had been adopted by various collective movements emerging since the 1960s. Instead, the book was organised into a series of sections, including, with reference to the wording of Section 28, 'Pretended Family Albums', 'Subverting the Stereotype' and 'Signs of Erotica'. Boffin and Fraser populated these categories with examples of lesbian photography that ranged from the better known to the newly commissioned. The editors solicited contributions first through an unanswered open call and then, with more success, through the various political and academic networks that they were connected to. The substantial labour undertaken by Boffin and Fraser to this end revealed a rich field of lesbian photography that unfolds across the pages of the book. These contributions included Mikki Ferrill's cathartic pictures of dykes parading through city streets, alongside Rosy Martin's phototherapy project *Transforming the Suit*, in which she restaged cultural signifiers of lesbian identity in order to decode them. The book foregrounded experiences of sexual orientation in relation to class and race through Jackie Kay's poetry, a highly personal reflection on coming of age in Scotland within an adopted family, and Mumtaz Karimjee's *In Search of an Image*, which searches out a portrayal of lesbian identity resistant to the colonial imaginary of both East and West. Rather than assume that a photographer's lesbian identity would alone produce interesting photographic work, the editors published projects that shared 'an interest in subversive strategies of representation, and a scepticism about the reflective nature of the photograph'.

*Stolen Glances* was a theoretical intervention as much as it was a practical or political one; indeed, the book showed how these three were intimately intertwined. The book is punctuated by the writing of people like Jan Zita Grover, Sue Golding and Elizabeth Wilson, whose essay 'Making an Appearance' argues for the erotics of the lesbian gaze. A number of contributions chart the shifting historic ground underpinning equally mutable lesbian styles and identities, including Sonja Ruehl's 'Developing Identities', Martha Gever and Nathalie

Magnan's 'The Same Difference: On Lesbian Representation' and Mandy Merck's "'Transforming the Suit': A Century of Lesbian Self-portraits'. The inclusion of Merck, then editor of *Screen* as well as the Channel 4 lesbian and gay lifestyle show *Out On Tuesday*, indicates to a broader scene of lesbian cultural production in London that the editors were connected to. Similarly relevant is the recognition, in the acknowledgments, of support from various individuals, including Valerie Mason-John, who went on to co-edit (with Ann Khambatta) *Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves*, an early study of Black lesbian identity, and Cherry Smyth, the poet whose contribution to recording lesbian visual culture in the early 1990s is almost without parallel. Emerging out of, but also offering a space for these ideas, *Stolen Glances* made its intervention into photography. Whilst Burgin had noted only in passing the importance of feminist politics to the politics of representation, and feminist discourse had often elided the question of lesbianism, the book made the crucial insight that the denaturalisation of lesbian identity could engender the same for the medium of photography.

### **Framing fantasy**

The antecedents for this project are signalled by the inclusion of a number of North American photographers. Pictures by Morgan Grenwald, Cathy Cade and Tee Corinne reflect the important crucible provided by the US lesbian feminist movement for lesbian visual culture as well as more diverse beginnings such as the radical leather/S/M lesbian subcultures that were emerging in metropolitan centres such as San Francisco. The transatlantic point of reference is important, for recognising paths of influence as the scene developed in the UK and to contextualise the present interest of UK-based artists in North American histories. In the unevenly told story of queer photography, Grenwald, who was instrumental in founding the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York in the 1970s, offers a lesbian counterpoint to Hal Fischer's recently republished *Gay Semiotics* (1977). Cade's 1987 publication *A Lesbian Photo Album: The Lives of Seven Lesbian Feminists* was a groundbreaking survey of radical lesbian activists from the Bay Area community that sought to disturb the stereotypes that characterised straight representations of lesbian life. Corinne's use of solarisation and montage to obscure the identity of her models also challenged the idea of a male gaze. Corinne's images are exemplars of the constructed imagery that Boffin and Fraser advocated as a site upon which representations of lesbian identity might arrive unanchored from any essential idea of what lesbianism might be.

*Stolen Glances* framed fantasy as an underexploited strategy in contemporary critiques of the photographic image described above. Such a claim underpins much of the material included in the book. Jackie Duckworth's photo-essay *Coming Out Twice* is a study for a film that used a surrealist-inflected aesthetic to explore the isolation of the body culturally inscribed as both disabled and queer. Fraser's contribution to the book, a series of images titled *Celestial Bodies*, subverts Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1883) and depicts a scene of nuns intimately sharing literature and other forbidden fruit in the sanctity of a convent. Both irreverent and seductive, *Celestial Bodies* mined literary and art historical references in order to tackle the insidious moralism that underpins the state and its institutions. The prevailing genre of the photo-essay in both examples is suggestive of the way that photographs might be 'read', and in doing so participate in cultural critique.

Anxiety around images of lesbian sexuality was not the domain of the state alone. The inclusion of lesbian erotica in *Stolen Glances* illuminates the heated debates occurring amongst feminists during the sex wars, which I have written about elsewhere. Della Grace's *The Ceremony* and Jill Posener's *Dirty Girls' Guide to London* both show how the codes and practices associated with public sex cultures, for example cruising and pornography, lent themselves to articulating highly politicised lesbian identities. By publishing works by these artists, Boffin and Fraser aligned *Stolen Glances* with so-called 'sex-positive' perspectives. Differently from the constructed work described above, the new lesbian erotica alluded to the role of fantasy in shaping lesbian identities against the essentialising logic of anti-pornography radical feminist groups.

Ingrid Pollard's contribution to the book also developed out of these debates, building upon discussions that took place as part of a group organised by Grace to discuss queer approaches to pornography and erotica. *DENY: IMAGINE: ATTACK* employed a combination of image and text, placing heterosexist descriptors and homophobic slurs alongside fragmented images of a body. Like other photographers whose work was included in the anthology, this strategy of fragmentation complicates the viewpoint of the straight male but also colonial gaze. Building upon works such as her *Pastoral Interlude* (1988), *DENY: IMAGINE: ATTACK* stages the Black body as a site of resistance. This was Pollard's first work in which she 'came out'. It registers the significant contribution of Black lesbian thought to queer visual culture, namely through its emphasis on reading intersecting experiences of socially constructed identity. This resonates throughout the volume, in the work of Pollard, Karimjee, Kay and the

writing of Jackie Goldsby. All decentre the primacy of gender in feminist debate in order to foreground the race and class dynamics at work in experiences of lesbian identity.

### **Backward glances**

Strategies of parody and appropriation were also central to *Stolen Glances*. Deborah Bright's series *Dream Girls* (1989–90) superimposed an image of an androgynous dyke into scenes from popular films of the 1960s, including the camp Alpine romp *The Sound of Music*. Lynette Molnar, working in collaboration with her partner Linda Thornburg, used montage to insert an image of the couple in a tryst into the heteronormative visual codes of advertising. Nina Levitt's *Conspiracy of Silence* abstracted the generic codes of femininity found in mainstream lesbian pulp novels of the 1950s through a series of five large-scale colour prints, reproduced—as are all images in the book—in black and white. Kaucyila Brooke's *Unknown Deviances (What a Dish)* co-opted the form of the comic strip, indicating towards the humour that underpinned many of the contributions. These manifold methods of distancing appropriated images of post-war popular culture established within a heterosexual social imaginary, revisiting the past in order to cleave a space for imaginative representations of lesbian life.

The idea that history might return, or be returned, to us in the political present is an idea that underscores Boffin's *The Knight's Move*, an essay-like assemblage of constructed images. In the first scene, references to a long history of lesbian photography are made through the inclusion of images by Alice Austen of the photographer and her partner Gertrude Tate kissing; by Berenice Abbott of Janet Flanner; and by Cecil Beaton of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas; all arranged under a headstone ornamented with an angel statuette. This image is followed by a series of striking studio portraits that depict the artist's friends as archetypal characters from fantasy fiction, such as knight, knave and angel. Boffin's starting point was an 'intense frustration... when people prioritise reality—everyday experience, 'real' sex and so on—over and above fantasies'. The staged scenes are framed by a short text that ends

I COULD HARDLY FIND YOU  
IN MY HISTORY BOOKS  
BUT NOW IN THIS SCENE

## YOU ALL COME TOGETHER.

Alluding to the possibilities of history and fantasy to upend the realm of the 'real', Boffin's work, as Flora Dunster has recently suggested, contributed to the anti-essentialising perspectives of queer theory as it developed in the US and the UK at the end of the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This project was sadly cut short by Boffin's death in 1992. Only now is her contribution to both theory and practice being excavated through Dunster's doctoral research. Crucially, Boffin's work allows us to reflect on the way that *Stolen Glances* frames lesbian identity as something that emerges differently at particular historical moments, whether in the context of modernity or of the women's liberation movement or as the fraught political terrain of the 1980s gave way to the decade in which the book was published. Here, history is something that is necessarily open to constant reinvention if it is to sustain lesbian life against the oppressive forces and devastating effects of cultural hegemony.

If the past is something that appears in *Stolen Glances* as a way to think about how lesbian identity unfolds in the present, what does it mean for the photography associated with the practices described here to be unearthed now? Partly at least, exhibitions such as *On Our Backs: An Archive* serve to direct new audiences to this work. 'Look at this', they say, as histories of lesbian visual culture manifest more unevenly, or else not at all, in larger institutional surveys. More profoundly, perhaps, these practices re-emerge at another time of political instability, where forms of identity politics are mobilised in insidious ways by the right. The desire to identify precedents for an anti-essentialist, trans-inclusive, anti-racist and sex-positive lesbian politics surely accounts for the return to the lesbian photography that was forged on the battleground of the sex wars even if such an approach runs the risk of rewriting history on the terms of the present. Interestingly, the theoretical insights represented by the book stage the reappearance of the practices discussed above as an ambivalent thing indeed. If *Stolen Glances* asks that we be wary of the double bind that visibility produces, it directs us to the ways that the institutions in which queer culture appears continue to govern the very conditions of being seen.

END

1 Flora Dunster, “‘Her Main Objection Seems to Be the Presence of Naked Bodies Themselves’: Tessa Boffin and the Politics of Representation’, Conference: Speak/Body: Art, the Reproduction of Capital and the Reproduction of Life (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2017).